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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
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INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 8393
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1030
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ SEP 9673
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 6575
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 2350
RUEHQH/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 7255
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 4591

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 003553

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/17/2018
TAGS: PTER KGIC PARM PREL CO
SUBJECT: INDIGENOUS LAND CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN CAUCA

REF: BOGOTA 2774

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
For Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Over the last three years, indigenous land protests in northern Cauca have led to more than 30 clashes with security forces. The local Paez claim the GOC has failed to fulfill a 1995 agreement--signed after the 1991 massacre of 20 Paez--which committed the GOC to buy 15,663 hectares of land for the Paez communities. To date, the GOC has turned over 10,082 hectares, with plans to buy 2,790 more over the next two years. Still, the Paez demand that the GOC hand over two farms allegedly owned by the "intellectual authors" of the 1991 murders as well. The GOC says the owners refuse to sell, and it will not expropriate the farms. A history of conflict between Cauca's large indigenous community and its non-indigenous population over scarce arable land--as well as the presence of the FARC and illicit coca crops in indigenous reserves--further complicates the dispute. The GOC has initiated a monthly dialogue with the Paez, but prospects for a solution to the dispute remain uncertain. End Summary.

GOC AND PAEZ AGREEMENT GOES SOUTH

¶2. (C) The GOC signed an agreement in 1995 with the Paez (or Nasa) indigenous communities of northern Cauca Department after the 1991 killing of 20 indigenous by security forces at the "Nilo" farm (see reftel). The agreement committed the GOC to add an additional 15,663 hectares of land to the Paez reserves (resguardos) and to institute social and economic development programs. May Ayda Quilcue, Chairperson for the Regional Council for the Indigenous of Cauca (CRIC), told us the GOC has not met its commitments to the Paez, leading to more than 30 violent clashes with security forces over the last three years. She says that as long as the GOC fails to meet its commitments, the Paez will continue to try to "reclaim their land by any means necessary," including land invasions and road blocks.

TWO FARMS THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF CONTENTION

¶3. MOIJ Indigenous Affairs Director Edilberto Herrera told us that to date, the GOC has acquired and handed over to the Paez 10,082 of the promised 15,663 hectares. The remaining 5581 hectares contain highly arable land, including two large farms (Emperatriz sugar plantation and Japio cattle and sugar cane farm) whose owners refuse to sell. Herrera said his office will buy 2,790 additional hectares for the Paez over

the next two years, but added that the GOC will not expropriate the two farms. Human Rights Ombudsman National Indigenous Director Gabriel Muyuy told us the GOC is unwilling to push to expropriate the farms, since a recently issued executive decree prohibits the MOIJ from purchasing land that has been "illegally invaded"--impacting the Emperatriz and Japio farms. President Uribe has publicly said he will not reward the Paez' violent actions by giving them the two farms.

¶4. (C) Muyuy told us the Paez insist on obtaining Emperatriz and Japio, because they believe their owners were the "intellectual authors" of the 1991 massacre. Colombian National Police (CNP) Commander for Cauca Colonel Luis Camacho said the CNP has no evidence to support such a claim. Still, National Organization of the Indigenous of Colombia (ONIC) International Affairs representative Joanne Washington told us recent testimony by former paramilitary Orlando Villa confirms the plantation owners were behind the murders.

¶5. (C) Brigadier General Leonardo Barrero Cordillo of the 29th Colombian Army Brigade said the Paez frequently invade the farms, burning crops, cutting cattle fences, and using women and children as shields against the security forces. Camacho told us the CNP's special anti-riot police unit (ESMAD) responds to the invasions. He noted that the majority of the violent protests occur on either the Emperatriz or the Japio farm. CRIC Chairperson Quilcue told us security forces recently "tortured women and children who were reclaiming their ancestral lands at these two farms." The Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN) reported receiving a letter in August from a so-called peasant group threatening indigenous groups. The ACIN believes the landowners sent the threats to divide the indigenous and local peasants.

ARABLE LAND SCARCE

¶6. (C) A history of conflict over Cauca's scarce arable land, the large indigenous population--the second highest of any department with 250,000--and the presence of the FARC and illicit crops in the indigenous reserves further complicate resolution of the conflict. Cauca Ranchers Association head Jorge Castro told us the ranchers fear an expansion of indigenous reservations, noting that only 30% of the land in Cauca is owned by non-indigenous. Of that figure, only 30% is well-suited for crops. The governor told us indigenous reserves encompass about 20% of the territory of Cauca; Castro says about 50% of that land is well-suited for crops. Herrera told us the GOC is committed to boosting agricultural production in the region and believes turning over more arable land to the indigenous will undercut this goal. CNP Camacho told us the Paez leaders plan to let the farms rest "198 moons" (eight years) between harvests.

FARC AND NARCOTRAFFICKER ROLES

¶7. (C) Libardo Becoche, an indigenous farmer, told us the FARC and the narco-traffickers want the land conflict to continue because they benefit from the on-going insecurity. The dispute facilitates FARC and narcotrafficker recruiting among the Paez, as well as making it easier for them to plant and process coca in the reserves. Cauca's Archbishop Ivan Marin Lopez said the FARC and criminal groups also skim off international aid intended for the indigenous. Third Army Brigade Commander General Jaime Esguerra told us the FARC has penetrated some Paez communities, especially near Toribio and Tacuyo. He claimed his soldiers have found small landmine "factories," as well as stockpiles of grenades, on the Paez reserves. Eleven of his men (not all in northern Cauca) have died from mines so far this year.

GOC CONTINUES DIALOGUE

¶8. (C) Cauca Governor Guillermo Alberto Gonzalez told us

the previous governor took a "hardline" against the Paez, adhering to a zero-tolerance policy on land invasions. He would prefer a negotiated solution, and has tried to reach out to the indigenous community. Muyuy said he tried to broker a deal with the Paez whereby the GOC would provide the Paez fewer hectares if they would give them the two farms. He said neither the MOIJ nor the CRIC accepted the proposal. MOIJ Edilberto says they have offered territory in neighboring Huila and Tolima departments, but the CRIC refuses land outside of Cauca. Gonzalez said he continues to meet with the indigenous in monthly dialogues led by MOIJ Vice Minister Isabella Nieto, but added that prospects for a solution on the two farms remain uncertain. CNP National Commander General Oscar Naranjo told us he also believes a compromise is necessary, and committed to supporting Gonzalez' efforts. He said the CNP has 400 riot police tied up in the region due to the land dispute.

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